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UNCLAS DHAKA 002304

SIPDIS

FOR SA/PPD (SSTRYKER, LSCHWARTZ)

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: POST RESPONSE TO NEWSWEEK ALLEGATIONS

1. The response in Bangladesh to allegations in Newsweek that the Quran had been desecrated has been less severe than that in other countries in the region. Although the Foreign Ministry has called for a full investigation and punishment of the guilty, the local press has concentrated more on the recent visit by Assistant Secretary Rocca than on the Newsweek article. Following the Foreign Ministry statement, Embassy Dhaka has responded through a press statement printed in local newspapers and a VOA interview with Ambassador Thomas.

2. Local Reaction: On Friday May 15 between 2,000 and 2,500 people took part in a peaceful demonstration in front of the National Mosque after Friday prayers protesting the alleged incident. The Embassy anticipates additional protest activity, but does not anticipate that it will be violent or will interfere in Embassy operations.

3. Press statement. The Embassy issued a press statement that included the statement made by Secretary Rice before the Senate Appropriations subcommittee as well as a statement by Ambassador Thomas. The statement was carried in all major Bangladeshi newspapers on May 16 in some cases on the front page. In many cases the Embassy statement was run parallel to the Foreign Ministry statement. In his statement, Ambassador Thomas promised that the alleged incident would be fully investigated and that any guilty parties would be punished. He stressed that the alleged incident is not representative of America which is a religiously tolerant country in which Muslims freely practice Islam at more than 1,200 mosques. He noted that Islam is the fastest growing religion in America.

4. VOA interview: The Ambassador conducted an interview with a local VOA stringer in which he made the same points as in the press statement. That story was carried as the lead item on the evening of May 15.

THOMAS